

REVIEW

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Blue/Green Glass Bottles From Roman Britain. By H E M COOL. 275mm. Pp xi + 253, 106 ills (some col), 67 tabs. Archaeopress Roman Archaeology 113, Oxford, 2024. ISBN 9781803277431. £50 (pbk), £16 (e-book).

Fragments from bottles are an almost inevitable feature of glass assemblages from Roman sites of the first–third centuries AD, but their value to archaeology is often overlooked, and excavation reports rarely describe or illustrate pieces in detail.

This book takes a giant step in redressing this situation, demonstrating what can be done when a more imaginative approach is adopted. Here, forty years of research into Roman bottles is distilled and analysed by one of the country's most knowledgeable specialists in Roman glass.

The title on the exterior cover is a little misleading as the book concentrates solely on square and other prismatic bottle forms, as is made clearer on the title page within. Cylindrical bottles, common in the first century AD, get only a brief mention. This is because much of the focus of the book is on the raised motifs found on the underside of mould-blown bottle bases, motifs that are absent on the plain cylindrical form.

The amount of data presented in the printed publication and the accompanying webpages (hosted by the Archaeology Data Service: <https://doi.org/10.5284/1117194>) risks becoming overwhelming, but it has been deftly organised into a manageable system. The book falls into three sections plus appendices. For those new to glass research, the first section introduces the form and gives useful practical advice on some of the tricks of the trade used by glass specialists. It is shown how rubbings can be taken of the base motifs, and how these can be manipulated

to provide consistent images for comparative purposes. A discussion of dating includes an important refutation of some previous claims of an Augustan origin for square bottles and argues convincingly that they came into use around AD 40–50, becoming hugely popular from the Flavian period onwards.

The author is careful to show the processes governing data collection, and this segment needs to be read carefully as it provides vital information if the main section of the book, a corpus of bottle base designs, is to be used effectively. Over seven hundred bottle base motifs have been divided into seven 'families', based on various defining design elements. These 'families' may not correlate with the original intentions of the bottle producers and in some cases they separate otherwise similar motifs. Nevertheless, as Cool emphasises, this is not a typology but a method by which data, even from mundane fragments, can be usefully interrogated.

The final chapters analyse how bottle base designs and vessel capacity can inform discussions of Roman trade and lifestyle. Cool sees a close relationship between the rise and fall in the use of bottles and the Spanish olive oil industry, suggesting that oil was dispensed from amphorae into bottles, which then had a relatively local circulation. Matches between base designs are surprisingly infrequent, and where they are observed across long distances, Cool suggests that the connection is likely to relate to military movements.

The information contained in the book and the associated webpages has been generously shared to the benefit of specialists as well as more general enthusiasts of Roman finds. A few more photographs of intact bottles would have made the book more inviting, but as these are readily available elsewhere, this is a minor point.

SALLY COTTAM